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Navigating social integration into university on Facebook: Insights from a longitudinal study

Naomi Barnes

Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract

This article reports on the experiences of 26 first year students as they record on Facebook snapshots of their experiences navigating social integration into university. There is still a substantial gap in student transition success research conceptually framed by the understanding that first year transition is about becoming. Transition as becoming expands current conceptions of transition by situating it within the real world rather than just within university. Facebook status updates were used as data because social media are integral to the life experiences of the young people and is a means to hypothesise where and how students were becoming university students. This article reports findings that acknowledge the tumultuous, cyclical, and chaotic experiences of first year students consistent with the idea that university is a part of a person's becoming.

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Introduction

This article reports on a section of a larger longitudinal study that tracked the experiences of school leavers (17 to 19 years old) throughout their first year of university using Facebook as a data collection tool (Barnes, 2014). The bulk of current first year transitions success research focuses on pedagogy and curriculum development (e.g. Kift, 2009; Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010; Nelson, Clarke, Kift & Creagh, 2012; Nelson & Clarke, 2014), which is understandable because they are processes which universities can control through policy and practice. According to Mills and Gale (2011), this approach to higher education creates the one dimensional view that the way to improve learning experiences is by improving pedagogy. What is overlooked is the fact that student learning is not the sole responsibility of the teacher (Biesta, 2015). Learning is multidimensional, individualised, and experiential. Formal dissemination of knowledge about how to be a first year student, despite how innovatively it is delivered, is only one aspect of how student knowledge grows. It is important to consider where and how first year students learn the university lifestyle. Furthermore, while past research is highly valuable, building on ideas that were developed in a different communication and technological context will provide only a partial understanding of the needs of contemporary first year students. This study contributes to these aspects of the field of first year university success. Stirling (2016) using a connected ethnographic approach showed how Facebook is broadly a part of being a university student and the study reported here looks to make connections between the use of Facebook and a university's role in a student's becoming.

Gale and Parker (2012) suggest that in student transition success research there is a gap that is based on the understanding that first year transition is about *becoming*. In the Deleuzian

sense of the word, becoming would transfer to university being just one part of the assemblage that is a person. Within this ontological framework, a first year university student is a person, who is currently experiencing university as one part of their continuous and forever becoming. To riff on a famous passage from Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987, p. 4): A university student is no single body. As an assemblage, a university student is in connection with other bodies, places, and experiences. While we as researchers only look within the space of university, we will continue to define what it means to be a university student rather than a person who goes to university.

Transition as becoming expands current conceptions of transition by situating it within the real world rather than just within university. Gale and Parker's (2012) definition of transition rejects the process as a particular time of crisis or a linear progression, acknowledging that it is far more complex and not "universally experienced and normalised" (p. 11). For example, the time of crisis could be experienced daily as students negotiate their identity at home and then again at university. Additionally, a linear approach to transition is not sympathetic to the wild and tumultuous reality of other life transformations such as childhood, adolescence, work life, and adulthood or the idea that it is possible to be an assemblage of several identities at the same time. This study does not see the informants as entities or things that need to become a new identity defined by the androcentric university system. Transition is seen, in the context of this study, as ephemeral, a series of fragments, flows and energies that can be linked together for a time (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010; Grosz, 1993; Quinn, 2010).

To investigate transition, I chose to use Facebook status update data because social media are integral to the life experiences of the young people and I saw it as a means to look outside of the bounded system of higher

education research that focuses on experiences within classrooms and on campus. Selwyn (2009), Jenkins, Lyons, Bridgstock, and Carr (2012), and Bosch (2009), for example, showed that undergraduates are describing their university experience on Facebook and Selwyn (2012) extrapolated on his findings to the question how social media data can be used to describe informants' perceptions of university. This article undertakes the advancement of this field of research and employs Facebook status updates to gain insight into the social integration of 26 first year university students.

This research also aligns with the Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2011) cyclical model of transition. They found that transition was not located at a point in time such as orientation, or even over a length of time such as the end of the first six weeks or the end of the first semester. These researchers found that transition was a continuous and cyclical process that occurred throughout a student's time at university. Furthermore, Penn-Edwards and Donnison found that not all students engage in their university studies in the same way, nor do they transition at the same time. However, they did find that there were certain *critical points* of the first year when experiences of transition are grounded in the university calendar: these are (1) acceptance of a place at university, (2) orientation week, (3) return of the first assignment, (4) end of semester, and (5) end of year. It is during these periods of time in the university calendar that data were collected for this study.

First year success literature suggests that social integration, autonomous learning, and self-efficacy are transition indicators (Brooman & Darwent, 2013). For this article, I have chosen to specifically focus on social integration due to the social nature of Facebook.

Social integration and social media

Tinto's (1975) interactionist model of student persistence provided the starting point for theorising the role of persistence in first year university. Based on Durkheim's (1951) theory of suicide, Tinto theorised that dropout was less likely to occur when a student was socially integrated. Tinto, while not the first theorist of student retention, is the most referenced in the field of student persistence in the first year of university. Tinto began to develop his model of student retention during the mid-1970s which centralised *involvement* (or what is now termed *engagement*) as being critical to student persistence (Tinto, 2006-7). Tinto's work has been criticised and expanded on by many researchers but his work still remains integral to the field.

Social integration is defined as the "extent to which a student feels connected to the college environment, peers, faculty, and others in college and is involved in campus activities" (Brooman & Darwent, 2013, p. 2). Tinto's (1997) model of student retention gave enormous weight to social integration and involvement in campus activities as being one of the keys to limiting attrition. Social integration is about building community so that learners "learn from one another, collaborate, feel safe to experiment, and be prepared for a workplace that is increasingly more team based" (Cullen, Harris, & Hill, 2012, p. 65). Due to the social nature of social media, social integration is also a key focus of the majority of literature that links the first year university transition success and social media.

Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield (2006) were some of the earliest researchers to make a connection between the use of Facebook and the first year university experience. This research highlighted the need for future research into student usage of Facebook, especially longitudinal studies that show how their usage changed over time. This research by Lampe et al. sparked a new direction in

research that connected college students and their use of Facebook. Madge, Meek, Wellens, and Hooley (2009) investigated the use of Facebook to improve the educational experiences (both social and academic) of first year students. Madge et al. saw the potential for research using social media experiences of first year students, and suggested the need for less homogenised longitudinal studies that questioned how university oriented Facebook use has changed over time.

Stephenson-Abetz and Holman (2012) conducted a study into the transition experiences of first and second year university students and their experiences with old and new connections. They found that Facebook provided a link to old connections, helped to preserve memories of students' pre-university life, and eased homesickness and feelings of isolation. Additionally, they found that Facebook provided a space for the students to re-invent themselves if they so desired. Furthermore, the researchers found that students overwhelmingly loved how easy the use of Facebook was to communicate with and befriend people at university. Facebook allowed the students to connect with people on campus before starting first year, to get a sense of life at university, to chat with classmates about academic requirements, and to stay connected with high school friends and family members, often on a daily basis. Gray, Vitak, Easton, and Ellison (2013) targeted first year students when researching the role Facebook had in the students' social adjustment during their first year of college. Gray et al. found that students who had a high number of Facebook friends and who engaged in university-related discussions on Facebook were more likely to adjust successfully to university and continue their study.

There is a large body of research into the social implications of social media and the experiences of first year success but the above literature does not consider the student

experiences that they describe on Facebook. This research aims to fill that gap.

Methodology

As stated above, Penn-Edwards and Donnison (2011) acknowledged that there are certain *critical points* of the first year where students have indicated they are cognisant of their transition experiences. Therefore, while the research reported here ontologically understands transition to be fluid, it is necessary to enact some form of organisation for the reporting of results. As such, I used *four* of the aforementioned critical times to gather data.¹ The research reported here is an addition to the results of a larger phenomenographical study that thematically analysed the experiences of first year university students at the aforementioned four critical points during the university year: (1) orientation week, (2) return of the first assignment, (3) end of semester, and (4) end of year (Barnes, 2014; Penn-Edwards & Donnison, 2011).

At the conclusion of the phenomenographical study, I sensed that the status data had more to reveal. At this point, I moved outside phenomenography and noted experiences of transition across the entire data set during all four critical points in time. I returned to the literature to search for a method by which to frame this extra process. I used an abductive reasoning strategy to hypothesise and speculate about how the informants socially integrated into university over their first year by reading the Facebook status updates through Lawrence's (2005) conceptual parameters of integration into university, which are explained below.

¹ It was not possible to collect data at the time the informants accepted a place into university as I was unable to practically recruit them until enrolment.

Abductive reasoning

Abductive reasoning involves the development of an evidence-based hypothesis “which appears to explain what has been observed; it is observing some phenomenon then claiming what it was that gave rise to it” (Blaikie, 1993, p. 164). Peirce, Hartshorne, and Weiss (1935) synonymously referred to abductive reasoning as *retroduction* and *hypothesis* and explained it as a necessary process of the scientific understanding of a phenomenon. Peirce et al. (1935) described abductive reasoning as “surrender to the insistence of an idea” (p. 404). They suggested that abductive reasoning comes before inductive and deductive reasoning occurs. Without giving in to an unsettled feeling that there is something more to a phenomenon, scientific research through observation and experimentation could never occur. As such, the findings simply point to the direction for future research.

Abductive reasoning is a rigorous process of speculation based on bringing literature and theory to bear on empirical findings. For this study, I framed my abductive reasoning through Lawrence’s (2005) conceptual parameters to suggest that student success is determined by balancing of reflective, socio-cultural, and critical practice. Reflective practice is defined as the ability of first year students to “observe, watch, and listen to the cultural practices occurring [on campus]” (p. 24). In other words, the students think about what they have learned and observed and make decisions about moving forward. Socio-cultural practice is defined as the ability of the students to establish interpersonal relationships that will help them become familiar with university culture. This means associations with professional and academic staff, not just classmates. Critical practice is intrapersonal, interpersonal, and reflexive. It is intrapersonal because students must have an ability to understand personal capabilities and to understand the milieu of the university.

The abductive reasoning within this study is hermeneutic in that it is a report of my interpretation of the informants’ status updates through Lawrence’s (2005) lens. I have engaged in a creative interpretive act (Kara, 2013) in which I took the informants’ status updates and assessed them in contrast with what I understood through the literature on social integration to university. The reader will again assess what I wrote in alignment with their own understanding of their own context (Gadamer, 1975). The following is a form of hermeneutic abductive reasoning and the reader will have to read the results and bring their own criteria of understanding to the material (Gadamer). That is something I cannot control, but as a duty of care to the informants of this study who entrusted me with their Facebook timelines, I have a duty of trust to tell their stories of becoming and a duty of care to protect them as well as possible. I simply hope I have done justice to the informants’ trust.

Method

The informants were school leavers entering their first year of university and had an active Facebook account. The 26 informants all attended one of three multi-campus universities in Southeast Queensland and were enrolled in a diversity of courses including education, creative industries, marketing, and engineering. The informants were recruited through emails to first year university students via their first year liaison supervisors, by myself to past high school students, and directly via Facebook networking tools. Initially, the sample was 35 students because it included any student who was willing to participate, but nine informants did not lodge descriptions of their university experiences during the four critical times.

A Facebook profile named *FirstYear Uni*, was created to be my online presence for the duration of the study. The *FirstYear Uni* profile enabled recruitment and interaction with the informants through either the status update or

the direct messaging tool. These tools allowed either public (status update) or private (direct messaging) communication between the informants and myself. On the profile, I also recorded the informed consent materials, directing each informant to read the information. They agreed to participate by adding the *FirstYear Uni* profile to their Facebook network. I also reminded them via status updates and direct messaging to consider the information published on the *FirstYear Uni* profile page. By agreeing to connect with the profile, each informant became part of my Facebook network. The profile had a newsfeed that showed the public status updates and other Facebook activities in which my network was engaged. It was via this newsfeed that I collected status updates.

Data for this study was collected through manual data crawling (Wilson, Gosling, & Graham, 2012). The study-specific Facebook profile, allowed me to collect conversations about university experiences 24 hours, seven days per week. I collected both their status updates and any further commentary the informants made within the thread initiated by the status update. Other members of the informants' networks who were not covered under ethical clearance also made comments on the informants' status updates. I did not collect this commentary but, I extracted enough information to assist in enhancing the informants' meaning in their status update. The transcription of data was the status and commentary data of the informants. The status updates collected were only those directly and obviously related to their university experience. If the status updates that were not clearly about the informants' experiences of the university were not collected. I felt it was important for the informants' privacy that I make this limitation. Further ethical considerations of this method are discussed in Barnes, Penn-Edwards and Sim (2015).

Results and discussion

The following makes explicit the abductive reasoning about the informants' social integration using descriptions derived from the status updates. While it would be preferable to quote the status updates of the informants, the searchability of social media threatens the informants' anonymity (Henderson, Johnson & Auld, 2013). This is an ethical ramification I am still troubling. Therefore, the findings reported here are my words formed through rigorous, iterative analysis of the informants' words. I acknowledge that the data, as with all data, only provided insight, not a holistic understanding of the online or offline world of the informants.

Orientation week

There was little evidence that the informants made new connections on campus during the orientation weeks. There was evidence, though, that some informants were trying to make social connections through participation in organised orientation activities designed to help the students make friends. For example, M07² listed a week of activities aimed at encouraging social integration, such as trips to the beach and parties. He listed six welcome parties sporting activities, and visits to famous tourist attractions like *Wet N' Wild* and Mooloolaba Beach. The expectation for parties and opportunities for social integration were also indicated by M01. Other students were more sceptical about the opportunities for parties as part of integration into university. F11 indicated that she was beginning to work out the structure of university when she disagreed with her network that the orientation weeks were full of fun social activities. She indicated a belief that the weeks

² The numbering of the informants indicates their specified gender recorded on Facebook and the position of their recruitment. For example, M07 was the seventh male informant recruited.

were only about introductory lectures and not like the orientation weeks of the past.

The majority of the social interaction took place with the informants' established network. For example, M04 wrote that his first day at university involved Facebook during his lecture. Furthermore, F12, M01, and M06 explicitly asked people in their established network if they are at university and organised to meet them on campus. Also, the structure of the status updates resembles news, where the informants simply or colourfully described their activities.

The informants were also engaged in socio-cultural practice by using Facebook for negotiating university experiences. M10 discussed a course, a shared lecturer, and the difficulty of the subject with a past student and formed an opinion of what his semester would involve. One student (F12) indicated that she used established university structures to find out the answer to a question. In her case, she received a telephone call from a member of university staff about how to negotiate her timetable. She was informed that she could speak to someone about minimising gaps between classes and organise room for work commitments. Of note, is that F12 used that information to give advice to other members of her network as she shared the information given to her through the phone call on Facebook.

These examples extracted from Facebook suggest that the experiences of becoming are plugged into family, friends, and workplaces. The informants could be seen to be manipulating the university experience to fit into their own identity assemblage rather than changing themselves to fit into university.

First assignment

By the critical point of the first assignment, the students informally discussed their course requirements on Facebook; an indicator that

they had formed connections with fellow first year students and were socially integrating into university. For example, F08 discussed the Lewis Structure of phosphoric acid with people in her course; M05 hyperlinked to a member of his network to make public where he sat in his lecture; and F01 and her classmates used Facebook during a lecture to discuss assignments, comment on content, and evaluate the lecturer.

There was still evidence that the informants were discussing their university experience with connections outside of their classes. For example: M05 made a comment about his hatred of APA 5th formatting, only to be informed by a member of his network who was further along in his tertiary education that APA 5th was out-dated; F11 described her quest to find the best coffee on campus on the advice of a past student and through recommendations from people in her network; and M01 engaged in a discussion about travel time with a past student.

By the first assignment, the informants could be seen to be assembling their identities by plugging into assemblages within the university, such as fellow students, facilities, and teachers. As they wrote to their network, they were laying claim to their university identities: such as knowing content, sitting up the front, criticising teachers, and describing their location in terms of distance from university.

End of the first semester

There was a marked shift in social integration between the first assignment and the end of the first semester. While there was evidence throughout the status and commentary data that the informants were still connected to their outside-university network, the collected status data indicated their inside-course network played a larger role than in previous times: F02 said she loved her university friends; F07 networked with her university

connections to organise activities during the inter-semester break; M10 specifically hyperlinked classmates into his status update when he described his experiences as he prepared for an exam; both F07 and F10 asked the people in their course if they had received results for assessment; and M05 used Facebook to provide feedback to someone after he proofread a report.

By the end of the first semester, the Facebook status updates suggested the informants' becoming was beginning to plug into their success at university through concentration on results and preparing assessment for the end of semester. As holidays loomed, the informants were also seen to negotiate whether they would continue to plug into their university network or unplug for the duration of the semester break.

End of the year

At the end of the informants' first year of university they were seen to be reflective about their experiences. The status data evidenced a variety of levels of social integration. Such as at the end of semester one, there were status updates that directly asked questions about course content and specifically linked classmates for organising study groups. Interaction with outside-course connections are also strongly evident: for example, F05 discusses, with classmates and others, her reasons for wanting to withdraw; M09 gives advice to people who are doing other exams; and M05 wishes students in another course luck in their exam.

There remained variation in individual experiences. For example, questions were asked about the necessity of a university degree at this particular time in their lives. F05 wrote that she is thinking about withdrawing from university. She explained that she has a learning difficulty which prevented her from transferring her engagement in class into her written assignments and exams. She described

her depression about a sporting injury that prevented her from engaging in the only social activity she could afford. F05 wrote about how she struggled to balance the need to work, how much she needed to work to keep up with her studies, and her lack of social life. She stated that her stress levels were high and she felt hopeless.

F05's discussion is a salient example of how university is just a part of her assembled identity. She appeared to be resisting the pressure to be just a university student, explicating all the other aspects of her life she was plugged into and were acting on her. She particularly focused on how her university identity, that people perceived in class, was different from what she saw as her identity due to a learning difficulty, an injury that prevented her from becoming an athlete, and her unplugged social life. F05 is clear that she was not simply a first year university student.

Where to from here?

At the beginning of their first year of university, the informants were concerned with negotiating their new lifestyle and finding friends. Social integration began before the informants arrived on campus because they were drawing on the knowledge of their old friends and acquaintances to inform their transition. As with Stephenson-Abetz and Holman's (2012) study of Facebook usage, a large aspect of first year university learning experiences occurred online and took place with friends and relatives. Facebook status updates and associated commentary showed that the informants were sharing their experiences on Facebook with people from multiple areas of their life, including school friends, family, and university students from their course (in various year levels), and other courses.

This study cannot know whether the informants were also using the formalised structures within university to aid their

transition, but what this study has shown is that much of the business of understanding university was conducted online. The informants were heavily reliant on their network to help them negotiate their transition and come to understand the socio-cultural structures of their universities. The difficulty arises that no transition curriculum can effectively control the role that social media plays in students' transition. A university can only control its own pedagogy and curriculum and, while there is evidence in this study that the expectations and structures of university were infiltrating the lives of the students, the informants' Facebook status updates remind us that there are other factors at play that a university cannot control but can look for ways to support.

One solution to the problem is to shift the teacher/student paradigm in first year curricula to a learner centred paradigm that treats all invested in the business of first year university as learners. Teachers should not be expected to be experts in matters of each individual student's transition experience, because the students who attend first year university are ever-becoming beings. Expertise is already wide spread in the general understanding of successful transitions to university, but the skills could better be applied in shifting the ontological understanding of how university plays into a person's larger identity machine. First year of university educators need to be aware of how university is one part of a person's continuous and forever becoming.

The Facebook status data is both the strength and the weakness of this study. The nature of Facebook status data is the ability to record raw, immediate, and often intimate (yet decontextualised) details of informants' experiences. There is still much to learn about how people juggle and formulate their public online identities in continuously changing environments such as social network sites (Baym & boyd, 2012). Regardless, people will

exhibit a constructed identity according to the context, and online identity is simply another context in a person's reality.

This study has shown the integrated role social media play in the transition experiences of first year university students. While some researchers have employed social media to improve transition experiences (Gray et al., 2013) and others have tried to integrate them into learning (Bosch, 2009), there still exists a gap where educational use of social media is used to theorise personal experiences of education environments; how social media is shaping wider university experiences. The use of Facebook as a data gathering tool is an emerging field in higher educational research. To date the majority of research has been limited to how students use Facebook, its use for compelling social integration, and its relevance in a twenty-first century curriculum. The findings reported here, indicate that the use of social media could be far more integrated in the transition experience than a mere tool for enablement. Students are using social media to publicly write themselves into becoming university students through reflexive practices and inquiring into the socio-cultural structures of universities. This suggests that social media are not mere tools, but a key part of a person's becoming as they navigate university.

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